



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“The Right of Conscience”
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First things first: tomorrow is the last day to register to vote in Pennsylvania for the general election upcoming on November 8. You can visit vote.pa.gov and click on “Register to Vote” and do it online!

Why DO we talk about voting during worship?

Because the act of voting is sacred work.

Both of my grandmothers were born into this nation at a time when they would not be granted the right to vote on account of their sex. They were born into a nation which did not consider them full citizens, which did not yet acknowledge the importance of hearing from all citizens of a country when it is time to select leaders and to make decisions. The evolution of the democratic process has meant a great broadening of who it is the process exists to serve, to the benefit of all - and a great broadening of who may participate. It was important to me, growing up, to learn how recently this right had been granted to me - only about 50 years before I was born, how recently my full citizenship had been secured. Learning that a right can be given leads to the parallel learning that a right can be taken away. The more we learn about how fleeting a right may be, the more precious it can - it should - become.

I would ask us today to consider how precious our rights to vote, to participate in a democratic society - however flawed - are. When we reflect on the way rights may be taken away, it might feel particularly heavy on our hearts in this

season. And when we feel heavy within our hearts, we think - or I hope that we think - of our faith community as a place to turn.

Unitarian Universalists have a deep and long-standing relationship with democratic (that's with a lowercase "d"!) ideals. They are so important that they are enshrined within our Seven Principles, most expressly our Fifth Principle:

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

Much as the democratic process has broadened its circle of participants in our nation, so too has the democratic process within our congregations grown to promote the participation of many more people with different life experiences, personal beliefs, and journeys of faith. And yet, we acknowledge that this process is not complete, in our nation or in our congregations. Who is welcome? Who has a voice? Who has a vote? How often do we hear the words, the ideals, the opinions of those whose lives and worldview are deeply different from our own?

Unitarian Universalism has roots within the congregationalist movement of the Puritans, early colonizers of this country who found their way here in order to be free to worship and form religious community in the way of their own choosing, rather than being beholden to a corrupt structure of church leadership in England. Puritans still had many requirements in order to join their self-governed churches, principally a personal direct experience of revelation from God. Over time, congregational churches and those faith communities arising from that tradition have increasingly made the way for more and more to participate in the vital life of the congregation.

In matters of faith, as in matters of civic engagement, the key principle I wish to draw our attention to today is connection. How many of us have heard of

the Cambridge Platform? Hands? Not too many, I expect, though goodness knows it does come up if one attends seminary...

In 1637, in the area that would become known as Dedham, Massachusetts, there were about 30 families living there who wished to start a church. But they didn't know each other. What to do? In our UUA curriculum "Faith Like a River," this answer is given: "To that end, they began a yearlong series of cottage meetings, each organized around discussion of a particular question. We might think that in order to know each other's religious views and needs these New England ancestors might choose topics like salvation, damnation, predestination or morality. But they did not. What they mostly discussed were matters of civil organization, for in their understanding, the church would reflect the ethic of the larger society, and what they longed for was sincere religious association based in love and founded in freedom." There is, of course, another conversation to be had here about whose freedom they meant by this statement - the history of the expansion of democratic ideals was, and is, a slow process indeed. Still, by 1648, congregations in that area that grew around those cottage meetings had adopted a document, the Cambridge Platform, proscribing the acts of cooperation and support that should define their religious and inter-religious life. Some of those that adopted this platform were parts or precursors of Unitarian Universalist congregations that still exist in that area today.

The most important factor for these particular ancestors in faith was to address the question: "How shall we live?" This question, in conversation with a partner query, "What happens when we die?" form the basis of the wide swath of social, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual endeavor we call religion.

What happens when we die will likely always be up for debate, nothing known for certain until we can no longer report back. How we shall live, however, is a resonant and holy question that we can work with, day in and day out, on our quest for an existence - not just for ourselves but for all - that is both just and joyous.

Speaking of the role of faith in democracy, Rev. Parisa Parsa, currently serving our congregation in Newton, Massachusetts, has written this: "If faith's necessary companion is doubt, democracy's necessary companion is alienation. We who keep returning to faith do so because we live steadily with doubt, and we make a choice to live into it and let it deepen our relationship with the sacred. We who live in a democracy are constantly asked to choose between our faith in the abstract ideals of our political system and our doubt that we can affect anything at all. It's the same basic question that is at the heart of all religious journeys: Will I act *as if* I am connected to something greater, and therefore *as if* my life and actions are significant, or will I act *as if* I am completely separate and isolated from others, and therefore *as if* my life and actions are of little or no consequence?"

Forming community, staying in community, making decisions as a community - this is hard, spiritual work. Staying in it, staying in the work of democracy when we are awash in fear, in doubt, in tales of corruption and injustice that weaken our resolve and increase our despair - that is hard, spiritual work. When we choose to live into our principles, our UU values, it will provide us challenges again and again. And if we do not return, despite those challenges, if we do not return to the work of co-creating a just and joyous world for all, then we give ourselves over to alienation, to separation, to creating a hell for ourselves on earth. After all, this is what our Universalist ancestors have to teach us: no loving God would condemn us to hell, but we can certainly create it for ourselves. Actively or passively, if we do not side with love, with justice and joy and the hard work of human community and democracy, we will create the hell of separation, of alienation, that diminishes the human spirit and drains the very force of our lives.

And this, this is why I chose today's reading. "You Are Who I Love." This poem by Aracelis Girmay was written as part of a conversation between poets created by Split This Rock, an organization whose mission is "Calling poets to a greater role in public life and fostering a national network of socially engaged poets." This poem was part of a collection that arose from that conversation around the future of democracy, in January 2017. I will share the end of the

poem with you again, this poem I consider a love letter to all who struggle, who doubt and question and rage and stay in it anyway, who keep voting and helping others vote, even when it feels like the tiniest ritual in the face of terrifying rising tides of injustice, indifference, and fear.

“I love

your working heart, how each of its gestures, tiny or big, stand beside my own agony, building a forest there

[...]

You are who I love, carrying the signs, packing the lunches, with the rain on your face

You at the edges and shores, in the rooms of quiet, in the rooms of shouting, [...] and each of us looking out from the gorgeous unlikelihood of our lives at all, finding ourselves here, witnesses to each other’s tenderness, which, this moment, is fury, is rage, which, this moment, is another way of saying: You are who I love You are who I love You and you and you are who”

May our circles ever expand, may our empathy grow, and may we make the move to connection, to interdependence, and to the holy work before us.

Register to vote. Make a plan to vote. Please vote, and please help others to do so. All of us need all of us to make it.

May it be so.